

Convocation 2010

President Ronald D. Liebowitz

September 5, 2010

Mead Memorial Chapel

Welcome! It is my pleasure, on behalf of the faculty, staff, trustees, and your fellow Middlebury students, to extend a warm welcome to you, the class of 2014. I hope you have enjoyed orientation, which gave you a preview of the old Vermont saying, “if you don’t like the weather, hang around a few hours.” You witnessed a 40-degree drop in temperature in 24 or so hours, which, for good or bad, is both not unusual and only the beginning. In about five months, we will be longing for that dreaded hot and humid weather.

In reality, the hardy and variable weather is one of the things that makes this place what it is, and creates the kind of environment in which friendships and personal relationships are more important, more meaningful, and more long-lasting than in most other settings. There are few distractions in this beautiful, relatively remote, part of New England, which means students here rely heavily on one another for their social, intellectual, creative, and academic sustenance and energy. Though one of the great and sometimes unnoticed benefits of being at a place like Middlebury is the opportunity for students to get involved and make a difference in the town, in Addison County, and even in Montpelier, our state capital, living and learning at this institution revolves around being part of this intellectual community. It is a community filled with remarkably talented students, dedicated staff, and the very best faculty you can find, so long as you are ready and willing to be challenged and to take advantage of their talents and high expectations.

But I will come back to this message *after* I provide some background to the cane that, I hope, is still circulating among you—Gamaliel Painter’s cane.

Gamaliel Painter was one of the visionaries who helped to found Middlebury College more than two hundred years ago. He could barely read and write, yet he was wise to the world, knew how to assess risk, and had a remarkable ability to master whatever kind of work he pursued or needed to get done: a self-starter in the true sense of the word. He was a successful businessman, skilled negotiator, bold entrepreneur, and a farmer, and was always looking to improve his and, later in life, this town’s lot. Germane to us here, and to our College, Painter purchased land on speculation just east of the Otter Creek during a chance trip to the region, and then, years later, when things got stale in his native Salisbury, Connecticut, he moved his family to Middlebury in the early 1770s—largely at the nudging of his wife—to take his chances on a new life. When Painter moved his family to Middlebury, the population numbered fewer than 125, less than half the number of first-years living in Battell today, or only slightly larger than the population in Allen Hall.

By the 1790s, Painter, largely uneducated, saw the need for his two sons to obtain a better education than what he, Painter, had growing up in Connecticut. Thus, he began negotiations to establish a grammar school, or what he called a central academy, to offer such an education. In 1797, with the help of Seth Storrs and several prominent Middlebury families, Painter secured land on the west side of the Otter Creek and then won a charter to begin a grammar school.

A year later, in the fall of 1798, Timothy Dwight, then president of Yale and, at the time, New England’s most venerated educator, visited Middlebury. The Yale president was in Vermont to complete some research on the economic geography of the region, but also to enjoy Vermont’s wondrous natural environment while convalescing from a recent illness. The trustees of the new grammar school, and Painter in particular, believed strongly that if the fledgling town was to become prosperous, and the Champlain Valley was to become a viable region, both would need a college or university. In fact, prior to getting the charter for the grammar school in Middlebury, Painter had decided that the grammar school he was founding needed eventually to be expanded into a college, and believed that gaining the approval and support of someone of Timothy Dwight’s stature would make that all the more possible.

In what College historian David Stameshkin and Painter biographer Storrs Lee describe as the closest thing to a Potemkin Village-like affair, Painter and the grammar school trustees wined and dined Dwight during his visit to Middlebury. They asked Samuel Miller, who was most appreciated for having married an inn-keeper’s daughter, to host what was described as the best prepared meal anyone had ever witnessed in town. They garnished the meal, and the guests, with Miller’s finest liqueurs, and by the end of the dinner, the hosts had secured Dwight’s support for the project.

Soon after the Dwight dinner, Painter began his work with the Vermont legislature to gain permission to establish his college in Middlebury. His proposal failed to make the state assembly’s agenda in two successive legislative sessions—the 1798 and 1799 gatherings—but though irritated and impatient, Painter persevered. As a way to pressure the legislators to take up his cause in 1800, he offered Middlebury, with its spanking new court house, to play host to that year’s legislative session, and his offer was accepted. By the way, in those days, the state capital was not located in Montpelier, as it is today. In fact it was not located in any one place, but rather alternated each year between a town on the eastern side of the Green Mountains one year, and then one on the western side the next.

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Painter and his colleagues—all New England Puritans, and most of them educated at Yale—donated \$4,150 to construct the first college building. Classes began in the newly constructed building, which sat on the site of present-day Twilight Hall. For nineteen years after the College's founding, as both the College and town thrived, Gamaliel Painter walked the streets of the town and carried with him the famous walking stick that is circulating among you now. At his death in 1819, Painter left a bequest of more than \$13,000 to the College, a huge sum of money at the time, and it served to secure the College's future.

I provide this background so you can appreciate Painter's remarkable vision and determination, and become acquainted with one of the College's most important founders. The success of this College—indeed its very existence—is the result of Painter's vision and the elaboration of his vision by generation upon generation of his successors. His cane, a replica of which each of you will receive at Commencement, has become the College's most important symbol, and has come to represent many of the things we aspire to inculcate in our students—in all of you.

The spirit of Gamaliel Painter lives on in the rich history of this College. You, the newest members of the College's extended family, are now a part of this long and great history, and your College welcomes you today with open arms, an open heart, and some very high aspirations.

Those aspirations are rooted in what we already know about you . . . what you accomplished before you arrived. You are a diverse collection of bright, inquisitive, energetic, and eager learners and doers. As you bring your talents and experiences to this community, I challenge you to take advantage of the committed and talented faculty you now have as mentors and teachers, our dedicated staff, and your fellow students—the other 1800 or so Middlebury undergraduates—with whom you will form bonds of friendship that will endure well beyond your time here. Your fellow students, in particular, should be a remarkable source of inspiration to you. I encourage you to seek out as broad a swath of friends as you can. We strive as an institution to build a student body that is diverse in its background and life experiences for a reason, and that is to enrich your learning environment both inside and outside the classroom.

I know you will take advantage of many of the academic opportunities before you, and may even feel frustrated when you can't delve deeply enough into many areas of the curriculum. But not trying to "do it all" is sometimes a good thing. Doing things in balance is a challenge for all of us, especially for many of you who have been doing so many things for a good part of your lives. But in order to get the most out of your time here, I pass along the following advice:

No matter how much you wish to extend it, the day is 24 hours long.

The work load per course at Middlebury is demanding, and so when you think about how you will allocate your time, make sure to leave enough time to cover all you will be asked to do in four, not one, two, or three classes.

View your time here as a way to study both deeply and broadly. That is the advantage and indeed the purpose of coming to a liberal arts college. Unlike what you would do at a technical or pre-professional school, we require you to select a major, but also to take courses across the curriculum, selecting classes in disciplines you might have never taken before, or even knew existed.

Resist the myth that more is better—for example that two majors are better than one—and instead take advantage of the strength of our faculty and curriculum by taking multiple courses in the arts, humanities, languages, the social sciences, and natural sciences. You will graduate four years from now better educated and just as prepared to go on for a Ph.D. or to pursue any career you wish as you would have been had you completed a double major. More importantly, by taking courses broadly across the curriculum, chances are you will meet a faculty member who will excite you by material you otherwise never would have encountered, and perhaps change your life. Science majors might find reading Aeschylus' "Oresteia" or John Stewart Mill's "On Liberty," or doing landscape painting central to the rest of their lives, just as literature majors might discover a passion and life-long interest in ecology, molecular biology, or the study of the human genetics.

As you think about the next four years, then, try to think about striking a balance in what you study, in what you do outside your academic work, and in what you do for a social life. Contrary to how it might seem from afar, the transition to college is never seamless for anybody. And jump right in. Finding a significant connection to something here and finding it early—an athletics team, an *cappella* group, a literary club, or any of the College's 140-plus student organizations—will provide the kind of social entrée that will make the transition here easier and far richer. This, too, takes initiative, but we make it relatively easy to take that initiative: I recommend that you attend the College's activities fair, where you can meet members of many student organizations and learn about what each does and how to get involved. This year's fair will take place this coming Friday, September 10, from 4:30 to 7 p.m. on Hepburn Road and Proctor Terrace, which is located right behind us.

In addition to the numerous student clubs you will learn about at the fair, I want to draw your attention to two organizations that can offer a different kind of experience for you over the next four years. The first is something called the Solar Decathlon, a national competition sponsored by the U.S. Department of Energy, which seeks to promote creative thinking in the areas of environmental sustainability, solar energy, architectural design, and science. It is a competition that calls on colleges and universities to create teams of students to construct a house on the national mall in Washington DC, where it will be judged by judges in 10 different categories. The house, limited to 1200 square feet, must rely on solar energy, be environmentally aware, engineered and constructed in a sound way, and serve as a successful demonstration project for others interested in energy conservation and sustainable development in the field of residential architecture.

This is an international competition, and a liberal arts college has never gotten beyond the initial stage of the competition, largely because the final product requires extensive architectural, engineering, and environmental expertise, along with seamless teamwork and problem solving. Large universities with professional schools in each of these areas usually win the competition. However, a group of students at Middlebury expressed interest in the competition last year, and unlike current and past participating schools, we don't have an engineering school, school of design, or a graduate program in architecture. Yet, Middlebury's team won entry into the competition last March with a remarkably compelling and innovative design proposal that drew on the varied academic interests of the more than 50 students who make up the Middlebury team, along with their passions for sustainability and the environment.

Addison Godine is the student leader of the Solar Decathlon group, and I encourage any of you who are interested in such a project to contact Addison, or engage him and his student collaborators at the activities fair on Friday. They have welcomed first-years from the get-go last summer, and look forward to having some new blood join the effort. The success of our Solar Decathlon team should underscore for all of you the power and potential of a liberal arts education: how *what* you will learn, and *how* you will learn while at Middlebury can prepare you to tackle challenges and find creative solutions to a range of complex problems that the conventional wisdom argues is the preserve of specialized or graduate education. The broad-based liberal arts education you receive here, the demands of your professors for critical and analytical thinking, along with clear written and oral communications, and the chance to learn how to work effectively in groups will allow you, as it did our Solar Decathlon team, to tackle the kind of steep learning curve that was necessary to win entry into the 2011 competition.

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The Old Stone Mill assumes one needn't major in any particular area of the curriculum in order to pursue creative projects unrelated to one's studies. As hard as you will work in the classroom, and I can assure you that you will be challenged, it is important for you to find balance in your lives and time for reflective and creative endeavors during your four years here. Having the opportunity to pursue something that is not graded, and doing it in a special environment created by fellow students pursuing their own projects, will enrich both your academic and overall experience at Middlebury. The student board of the Old Stone Mill will be at the activities fair this Friday, and I encourage you to engage members of the board and find out how you can get involved.

Last year, in the midst of the deep economic recession, a parent asked me in a rather somber tone what hopes I had for the incoming class. My answer *then* was no different from what I would answer today, or what I would say if I were asked the same question in the middle of a prolonged economic boom.

I said that my hopes were that members of this class, and really all of our students, would take advantage of all that is here before them. I said I feared that too few of our students become familiar with the wealth of resources and opportunities before they graduate. I explained that our faculty, in addition to offering an A+ experience in the classroom, are poised to mentor our students and to help them connect with what is an extensive array of resources to help them delve more deeply into their interests, become better educated in the broad sense of the word, and develop the kind of character that is most likely to come from learning and living in a community like ours.

My hopes, then, revolve not around measured outcomes, *per se*, but rather around how much of what we offer you, you will engage and let engage you. If you explore, connect meaningfully with as broad array of people and courses as possible, and pursue your passions with great vigor, I am confident you will become not only accomplished in your chosen field of study, but you will also develop into the inquisitive life-long learner that a liberal arts college strives to develop and proudly produces—graduates who are confident and fully prepared to meet the economic, social, and moral challenges of an increasingly complex world. But so much of this is up to you, and will depend on how willing you are to take the initiative.

From the little I told you today about Gamaliel Painter, you should be able to deduce how Painter would approach a Middlebury education, if he had the chance to begin his studies with you today.

As his symbolic cane makes its way back to the front of the chapel, may Painter's legacy be felt by each and every one of you, and may you challenge yourself to make the most of the next four years at this remarkable College, just as you know Painter would have done.

Thank you, and best of luck, class of 2014.

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Office of the President

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